

New seabird records from Round Island, Mauritius

by Don Merton & Mike Bell

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During conservation management work being undertaken by the authors on Round Island, Mauritius, Indian Ocean, four species of seabird not previously recorded there were observed or captured.

Round Island ($19^{\circ}51'S$, $57^{\circ}48'E$; Fig. 1), a Nature Reserve, 22.5 km north-east of Cape Malheureux on the Mauritius mainland, has an area of 151 ha and rises to 280 m a.s.l. It is one of the larger and more distant outliers of a scattered group of six small uninhabited islands of volcanic origin off the northern coast of Mauritius. The island comprises part of the rim of an extinct and partly submerged basaltic volcanic cone. The surface is dominated by exposed rock with generally small isolated pockets of soil supporting remnants of degraded vegetation. Two mammal species were introduced last century - goats which were eradicated in *c.* 1979 and rabbits which were eradicated in 1986 (Anon. 1987, Merton 1987).

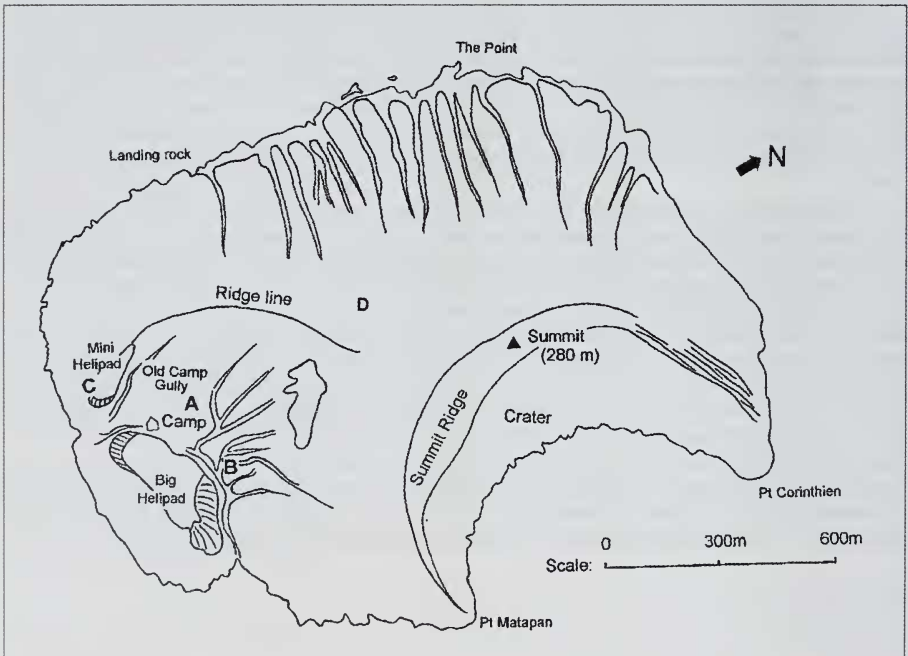


Figure 1. Location of seabird sightings on Round Island. A: Audubon's Shearwater caught 15 July 1988 and heard 11 August 1993, B: Little Shearwater caught 8 September 1986, C: Bulwer's Petrel caught 18 June 1987, D: Bulwer's Petrel incubating egg in nest, 7 December 1994.

Species accounts

LITTLE SHEARWATER *Puffinus assimilis*

At c. 2130 h on 8 September 1986 DM captured a Little Shearwater on the ground in a gully on the southern slopes of Round Island (Merton *et al.* 1989). This appears to be only the second record of this species from Mauritius.

This bird had sooty black upperparts, white underparts (colour of upper and lower parts were a little discoloured by oil); underwing white, tips of secondaries black; darkish eye/ear patch, bill with black top and tip, blue sides; outer leg dark blue, inner leg blue, toes blue except outer edge of outer toe black, webs pinkish-blue, claws black. Brood-patch not checked. No call heard. Measurements (mm): wing length 175.9, tail 70, bill length 24.3, bill depth 8, tarsus 37.9, MTC 40, claw 7.5. Mass 149 g.

AUDUBON'S SHEARWATER *Puffinus l'herminieri bailloni*

A small shearwater suspected of being Audubon's Shearwater was heard in flight before and soon after daylight on most mornings and occasionally sighted at night on the ground between 29 June and 15 July 1988. At c. 0515 h on 15 July 1988 DM flushed the elusive shearwater into a low-set mist-net in a rocky area c. 300 m above New Camp Gully on the southern slopes of Round Island. This capture enabled it to be positively identified as Audubon's Shearwater. The bird had no obvious brood patch. This is apparently the first record of this species from Round Island.

The bird was a smallish, dark greyish-black and white shearwater. Upperparts were sooty greyish-black with a brownish tinge on the scapulars, and a dark cap to below eye level. The breast band extended well down onto chest, white beneath. Under wing white with broad dark margins. Tail dark, under side of tail pale with 42 mm wide blackish band at tip. Eye dark brown. Bill black. Tarsus - upper and inner surfaces pink, lower and outer surfaces blackish; webs pink, outer toe (and outer edge of central toe) black. No brood patch. Measurements (mm): total length 295 mm, wing length 179.9, tail 74, bill length 25.7, bill depth 9.4, width at gape 11.2, tarsus 36.1, MTC length 38.9. Mass 183 g.

On 11 August 1993 MB and party heard what they took to be an Audubon's Shearwater during the night. This was at approximately the same location that DM had, seven years earlier, caught the bird described above.

BULWER'S PETREL *Bulweria bulwerii*

At c. 2300 h on 18 June 1987 DM's party captured a small dark petrel on the ground in a rocky area on the south-western slopes of Round Island. The bird was later identified as Bulwer's Petrel - apparently the first record of this species in the Mascarene Islands (Merton *et al.* 1989). Although this individual had a large, completely bare brood patch, no nest or further birds of this species were found during searches on that or subsequent nights.

This bird was a very small entirely sooty black petrel with a long wedge-shaped tail and a slight pale sheen around the face. The base of the primaries was perhaps a little paler. Bill and eyes black; legs greyish-horn colour with a pink tinge near joints; webs greyish-flesh, darker around edges and pinkish towards inner toe. Inner toe base and web pinkish-purple, inner 1/3 of inner web pinkish. Tail long, pronounced wedge shape particularly when fanned – central feathers much longer than others. Obvious filoplume “crest”. Interior of bill pale pink. Large completely bare brood-patch. No call heard. Measurements (mm): total length 276, wing length 217, tail 116, bill length 23.8, depth 10.8, width 9, tarsus 28.2, MTC 30.6. Mass 111 g.

On 7 December 1994 MB found a Bulwer's Petrel incubating an egg in a nest near the summit of Round Island. The nest was in an area of scattered rocks and rock piles. The bird was still incubating a few days later when the team left the island. An intensive search of the area did not reveal any further nests and night searches failed to locate any more birds. This was the first breeding record for the species in the Indian Ocean.

BLACK-WINGED PETREL *Pterodroma nigripennis*

Between 15 and 21 December 1992 DM regularly heard a gadfly petrel in flight in the late afternoon and after dark over the southern and south-western slopes of Round Island (Strahm 1993). The call was identical to that of *Pterodroma nigripennis*.

During the period 4 – 10 December 1994 MB observed a small gadfly petrel over the lower southern slopes of the island. It was seen and heard calling every evening at dusk. It was often seen in aerial pursuit of Herald Petrels *Pterodroma arminjoniana* and was slightly smaller than them. The bird was observed at very close range as it passed low overhead in response to “war-whooping” calls made by MB's party. The bird called regularly with a rapid “chee-chee-chee”. It was uniformly grey above with a reasonably distinct inverted W pattern on the upper wings. The head was grey above with a white forehead, and white below with a grey partial collar. Underparts were white, underwing white with a dark trailing and leading edge to the carpal joint and then diagonally towards the body about the mid wing. Bill black.

The bird was not caught and identification is based on the calls and observation at close range.

Conclusion

Removal of introduced browsing mammals has resulted in some stabilisation of soils, a marked increase in ground cover and the initial stages of regeneration of woody vegetation. Thus, the island is likely to become increasingly more attractive to breeding seabirds. This, together with its mammalian predator-free status and strategic location in the tropical Indian Ocean, make Round Island potentially a very important seabird breeding station. The occurrence of previously unrecorded petrel and shearwater species prospecting and breeding on the island is indicative of its recovery.

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The discovery of the Long-tailed Wren Babbler *Spelaornis chocolatinus* in Thailand

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We report the discovery of a population of the Long-tailed Wren Babbler *Spelaornis chocolatinus* on the 2,160 m peak of Doi Kajela (16° 10'N, 99° 02'E), in Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, Tak Province, Western Thailand, during a preliminary appraisal of wildlife and forests on this biologically unexplored mountain, 21–26 April 2001. The site had been identified, under the name Khao Kha Khaeng, as being of likely ornithological importance in Round (1988), and invited survey.

The authors were accompanied by Mr. Martin van de Bult, Field Botanist, Western Forest Complex Ecosystem Management Project (WEFCOM), two staff of the WEFCOM Project, Mr. Nont Khieowan and Mr. Kwanchai Waiphanyakam, Mr. Siriya Sriphanomyom, an undergraduate student from University of Khon Kaen, and two wildlife sanctuary workers, Mr. Tom Sertnio and Mr. Duangchan Bajai.

The party left the Mae Klong Khii Guard Station of Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, at Km 120 on the road between the district towns of Mae Sot and Umphang, on the morning of 21 April, reaching the upper elevations of Doi Kajela at midday on 24 April, a straight-line distance of only *c.* 9 km to the south-east. Progress was slow because of the absence of any known trail and because dense bamboo, resulting from old fire damage, had grown up along ridges at around 1,500–1,800 m, impeding progress. Camp was established on a ridge below the summit of Doi Kajela, in little-disturbed, broadleaved evergreen forest, close to a small stream gully, at 2,100 m, on the afternoon on 24 April. That evening, at around 1800 h, after the group returned to camp following an excursion to the summit area, PDR descended into